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The Representation of Art History in Mass Media: The Role of Architecture in Narrative

Art history and visual culture is portrayed by popular media in various contexts, from blockbuster to documentary, and approached through vastly different methods, ranging from the perpetuation of popular myth to academic commentary. A dichotomy arises between representations of art history from the perspective of scholarly research and the appropriation of art history as a source for creative inspiration. A veritable academic approach is perceived to depict an accurate, factual engagement with visual culture, yet large crowds bring commercial success to sensational re-imaginings of history, despite an awareness of a removal from historical truth. However, this notion that there is a singular “real” version of art history that can be conveyed through mass media discounts the significance of cultural perception. It is significant to consider historiography itself, and how currently accepted narratives have been manipulated through the process of preservation. Therefore, there is no better way to understand this process than by examining the way in which museums and architecture, that serve as monuments to art history, function within narratives in mass media. By comparing and contrasting two films with very different approaches to art history, it is possible to understand how knowledge can be communicated in a variety of ways, with aspects of truth as well as fantasy. Alexander Sokurov’s visually stunning masterpiece, *Russian Ark* (2002), is a film that presents snippets of Russian history that occurred within the former

palace of the Tsars over a period of 300 years, blending real historical figures and events with fantastical elements. In contrast, *If Walls Could Talk* (2011), a BBC documentary series hosted by curator and historian Dr. Lucy Worsley, examines the history of the home. In this deconstruction, Dr. Worsley analyzes the development of each type of room, conducting a sweeping art historical survey from the medieval period to the nineteenth century British Country House. In these films, the architecture and the depiction of art history takes centre stage, yet these presentations impart to the viewer drastically different types of knowledge and viewing experiences. As a result, this exploration of visual culture in both artistic film and academic documentary demonstrates how history can be understood through various sensibilities, and ultimately through both fact and fiction.

The film, *Russian Ark*, engages directly with architecture and the precious art objects within each scene, as it was filmed within The State Hermitage Museum. Sokurov expresses the history of Russia primarily through visual aesthetics. Mikhail Piotrovsky, the Director of the State Hermitage Museum, states that *Russian Ark* is a “film where the museum is not [a place] for curation...the museum was a hero of the film, a protagonist of the film.”¹ This is significant as the film is dependent upon its portrayal of the art world in order to create its narrative, informing viewers about the setting of the museum itself through its role in the film. In this sense, we can come to understand how Sokurov envisioned architecture of the setting as a direct link to the cultural histories that occurred within the museum, transforming this art historical monument into a character in itself.

¹ “In One Breath | Alexander Sokurov's Russian Ark (Making of),” last modified January 2016, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORMTAKh4NHI>.

This is further evidenced by behind the scenes footage revealing the addition of props ranging from those technical in nature, such as artificial lighting, to art historical objects within the museum's collection, such as fine tableware, which were arranged within the Hermitage for the sake of the narrative, in the same way an actor might wear a period costume and make up.²

Furthermore the structure of this movie as a single shot is also essential to the way in which art history is portrayed, introducing a temporal aspect to the film that converts it into both an exercise of time while also flattening this component of the narrative.

Sokurov shows the audience a series of iconic scenes recreated throughout the Hermitage, unbridled by chronology or a defined order. This disorientating strategy is achieved through the technical feat of filming the entirety of *Russian Ark* in one ninety-six minute Steadicam sequence shot, which received critical acclaim that led to the popularization of the film in mass media.³ This experimentation with time creates suspense akin to that of a live performance, as each scene must occur without a hitch or incorporate any mistakes into the narrative. Ephemeral phenomena such as natural lighting and windy weather shape the actions of the characters within the film, adding a veneer of realism, as there is no way to retake individual shots in order to optimize them. The iconic final scene of the Hermitage doors opening onto a billowing snowstorm (Fig. 1) is essential to reinforcing the protective nature of the museum as an ark of culture in contrast to the bitter Russian winter, yet it was also a serendipitous element that could not have been planned.⁴ Within the film, doors come to take on significance as a threshold

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

between one setting and another, utilized by the filmmaker during the transition of the camera's movement and the actors. In addition, these doorframes are occasionally interchanged with close-ups of picture frames while the surrounding set is reassembled, creating a link between the realms of art within famous paintings and then pulling away to reveal the historical context in which they were interpreted. Consequently, the positioning of these doors as a literal threshold at the end of the film is essential, as through this contrast between the exterior and interior it emphasizes Sokurov's desire to communicate "the eternal essence of culture" in the face of opposition in a visual manner.⁵ Moreover, the very process of filming *Russian Ark* reinforces this focus on the perseverance of culture. A unique event in the museum's history, the film is acknowledged as a masterpiece, using this filming technique to inscribe itself into the narrative of Russian visual culture.



Figure 1: Alexander Sokurov, *Russian Ark*, "Final Scene," film still, 2002.

⁵ Tim Harte, "A Visit to the Museum: Aleksandr Sokurov's "Russian Ark" and the Framing of the Eternal," *Slavic Review* 64 (Spring, 2005): 58, accessed December 1, 2016, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3650066>.

The narrators of *Russian Ark* also form an essential component of the audience's understanding of art history. The film's main dialogue is structured as a conversation between an unseen narrator, voiced by Sokurov, and a dark clothed figure, whom Sokurov identifies as "The European", who guides the camera, and thus the audience, through each scene. "The European" is inspired by a real historical figure, a Frenchman known as the Marquis Astolphe de Custine, who visited Russia in 1839 and published a controversial travel account of his time in the country.⁶ However, within this narrative Custine serves as narrative device to represent "The European" nineteenth century conception of Russia, illuminating the struggle between centers and peripheries within the art world. One particular quip, "Raphael isn't for you!" implies the envy of Russia toward the work of Italian masters, and the artistic rebirth that occurred in this artistic center.⁷ This information positions Russia as an outsider to the European art world, summoning a sense of isolation through the portrayal of Custine in a dimly lit room by himself as he comments on the artworks that are on display. The unseen narrator responds to Custine's critiques, emerging from Sokurov's perspective as a twenty-first century Russian spectator with the luxury of historical hindsight. In this way, Sokurov introduces an almost post-modern response toward history in the film, as he reflects on the words of "The European" revising historical details and adding nuances to develop the audience's understanding of Russian culture. This element of the film in combination with Sokurov's penchant to display scenes with the possibility of open interpretation

⁶ Yana Hashamova, "Two Visions of a Usable Past in (Op)position to the West: Mikhalkov's *The Barber of Siberia* and Sokurov's *Russian Ark*," *The Russian Review* 65 (2006): 256, accessed December 1, 2016, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3664400>.

⁷ Aleksandr Sokurov, *Russian Ark*, disc, directed by Aleksandr Sokurov (2002; St. Petersburg, Russia: The State Hermitage Museum, 2003.), digital HDTV film.

drew criticism for romanticizing a nationalistic, mystical view of Russian visual culture.⁸ However, it is possible that Sokurov utilized this approach intentionally; as he emphasizes that the film is meant to appeal to the audience's emotions using simple storytelling to create an intense historical impression upon the viewer.⁹ It is important to consider the notion that, "Feature films, even though historical, often present unreliable historical data, but in doing so they uncover the political and cultural conditions in which the films are created as well as the mental and psychological dilemma of their creators."¹⁰ This seems to speak to Sokurov's mindset as the unseen narrator and director of *Russian Ark*, as his focus on themes of eternity and the way in which the continuous single shot immerses the viewer into a dreamlike walk through history evokes a desire for the past. Therefore, through a visual analysis of these qualities, the nostalgia within the film seems to be intentional, perhaps even challenging the contemporary viewer to contemplate the tumultuous periods of Russia's history through its purposeful absence in the fantastical setting of *Russian Ark*. In this way, despite the illusion of realism executed through the process of filming a single shot and minimal editing, this film asks the viewer to consider whether real historical truth is possible to achieve within the representation of art history in mass media.

In order to examine this notion, one must consider how historic truth is conveyed in a vastly different approach to the art world in mass media, such as Dr. Worsley's BBC Documentary series on the history of the home, *If Walls Could Talk*. Focusing on Dr.

⁸ Tim Harte, "A Visit to the Museum: Aleksandr Sokurov's "Russian Ark" and the Framing of the Eternal," 43-44.

⁹ "In One Breath | Alexander Sokurov's Russian Ark (Making of)," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORMTAKh4NHI>.

¹⁰ Yana Hashamova, "Two Visions of a Usable Past in (Op)position to the West: Mikhalkov's *The Barber of Siberia* and Sokurov's *Russian Ark*," 252.

Worsley's investigation into the development of the living room reveals both similarities and striking differences to the presentation of art history in *Russian Ark*. These programs are comparable in the sense that they approach history on a similar scale, moving from encompassing three hundred years in *Russian Ark* to Dr. Worsley's examination of the living room from the medieval period to the present. However, there are notable differences. Dr. Worsley's series ultimately has a much longer running time than *Russian Ark*, devoting an hour long episode to each iconic room within the home. Furthermore, these documentaries have been divided into short clips and distributed on YouTube, diverging from the marathon mindset of the single shot of *Russian Ark*. Yet, fundamentally these programs are similar in their desire to use architecture to bring historical narratives to light. However, Dr. Worsley accomplishes this through the guide of localized experts interpreting and telling the histories of the objects within the living rooms they examine. This is in stark contrast to the minimalist approach of *Russian Ark*, which achieved depth through the levity of information. Dr. Worsley is an active narrator, and in many ways she is similar to "The European", as she supplies a contemporary academic narrative as we follow her throughout the various rooms and historical periods covered in the series. Whereas the museum itself worked as a whole to convey a particular aesthetic experience in *Russian Ark*, Dr. Worsley deconstructs individual components of architectural design, such as chimneys and glass windows, considering how the increased presence of these elements served as symbols of status and therefore could be linked to narratives of power.¹¹ In this way, the documentary provides an

¹¹ "Living Room – 'History of the Home'," last modified September 2011, accessed December 1, 2016,

experience much more akin to a tour at a museum, rather than creating an artistic experience. In this sense, the documentary seems to appeal to fact whereas Sokurov's film relies on the audience's reading of his work to convey knowledge. However, Dr. Worsley's documentary reveals that conjecture is also present in the academic study of art history. This can be seen in the medieval hall, where Dr. Worsley examines where she believes the head of the community would have sat, whereas the guest historian identifies a different location, yet both have particular reasons based on location and the design of the furniture as to why they believe the seat they chose is the one that represents the highest status. This reveals that ultimately it is possible to mobilize academic theory in various ways, resulting in elaboration and conjecture even within the realm of the documentary in mass media. In particular, this is perhaps more unsettling than the approach of Sokurov, as the medium of the documentary carries with it a particular gravitas that results in a less critical viewership due to the assumption of accuracy.

The representation of art history in mass media is a complex matter that can be examined through many layers, from the physicality of the art object itself, to the medium in which it is presented, to the ideological approach that is taken. Knowledge of the art world can be imparted through both academic programs and artistic experiments in film that provide the viewer with ideas to consider long after the experience has ended. The comparison of *Russian Ark* and *If Walls Could Talk* reveals the inherent subjectivity of the study of art history itself, and how we are able to convey this knowledge, as both academic and fantastical approaches bring their respective merits and limitations.

Fundamentally, it is the inclusion of the art historical monuments within these various

modes of representation that serves as the inspiration for these narratives. As a result, it is possible to understand visual culture through various strategies, and this accessibility enables viewers with diverse perspectives to engage with the study of art history.

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